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Vatican
Francis, the comic strip
Pope Francis is interviewed at the Vatican for "Stories of a Generation," a Netflix series based

Pope Francis is interviewed at the Vatican for "Stories of a Generation with Pope Francis," a Netflix series based on the pope's book, "Sharing the Wisdom of Time." (CNS photo/Simone Risoluti, Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis, Martin Scorsese, Jane Goodall and a group of less famous "over 70s" talk to young filmmakers about love in the first episode of a four-part documentary available worldwide on Netflix on Christmas Day.

The episode "Love," part of the series "Stories of a Generation," premiered at the Rome Film Festival Oct. 21.

The documentary is based on "Sharing the Wisdom of Time," a book in which Pope Francis called for creating "an alliance between the young and old people" by sharing their stories.

Published by Chicago-based Loyola Press in 2018, the book featured an introduction by Pope Francis, the stories of 30 older people and reflections by a handful of younger people on "What I learned from an elder."

Simona Ercolani, director and producer of the Netflix series, told reporters Oct. 21 that she started working on the project after reading the book, and then the COVID-19 pandemic struck, hitting Italy early and devastating its elderly population.

The idea to make the series "became urgent because every day we had a bulletin of deaths," she said. "We spoke with Netflix, which also felt the urgency of collecting the stories of people, who at that moment were more fragile. They liked this idea of a dialogue between generations — filmmakers under 30 and contributors over 70."

"The stories are extraordinary in their normality, because everyone, including Pope Francis, put themselves in a position of relating (to the filmmaker) not just as a grandchild, but human being to human being," she said.

Giovanni Bossetti, nonfiction manager for Netflix Italy, told reporters that the streaming service is all about sharing stories, so "besides the incredible access to the Holy Father" that Ercolani had, the series gave Netflix an opportunity "to tell stories that are completely different and that touch themes that are central" to the life of every person.

Eighteen elders from five continents and speaking four different languages appear in the series' four episodes: Love, Dreams, Struggle and Work.

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Pope Francis' commentary on the four themes and reflections from his own life appear in each episode.

While the series is not "didactic" at all, Bossetti said, the elders share important, universal values with the young filmmakers and the viewing audience.

For the Netflix series, Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro, editor of La Civiltà Cattolica interviewed Pope Francis while young filmmakers interviewed the other elders. Francesca Scorsese, 21, interviewed her father, the director and producer, Martin Scorsese.

Father Spadaro told reporters that Pope Francis agreed to participate in the series on the condition that he would not be "the star" of the project but would simply enter into the conversation like the other elders interviewed, "talking about himself and his personal experiences."

"The stars are the people the pope likes to refer to as 'the saints next door,'" he said. "They are normal people who are the heroes of daily life."

"What is love?" Father Spadaro asked Pope Francis.

That, the pope responded at first, would be like asking, "What is air?"

"You can say love is a feeling," or a series of electrical impulses or something akin to magnetic fields drawing together, he said. But one thing is certain: "Gratuity is key. Love is free or it is not love."

Tango, his grandmother Rosa, helping others and the importance of dreaming of a better world all come up in the papal conversation.

Speaking via Zoom, Jane Goodall, the primatologist and anthropologist, told reporters at the Rome news conference that the film, like her Roots & Shoots program for young people, can sow much needed hope by bringing elders and young people together.

"To bring the wisdom of the elders alongside the passion of the youth is what it is going to take to change the world," Goodall said.